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ABSTRACT

The social epistemic that the Mennonite-Anabaptists have been cultivating as their hermeneutic method for 470 years focuses on local congregations as discourse communities of faith, promoting egalitarian lay participation equal to that of members with formal ministries. "The Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective" features a renewal of the Mennonite tradition of congregational hermeneutics. The Mennonites' aim is to be faithful and obedient, in whatever circumstance, to their faith. Biblical scripture is foundational to this obedience; consequently, hermeneutical processes are essential. Religious histories reveal that, although Anabaptism moved away from Catholicism, it was not a part of the Protestant mainstream. One dispute centered on the church's authority over civil governments in making decisions regarding faith and Christian conduct. Also, the validity of infant baptism was rejected in favor of adult, believer's baptism. Over the years, Mennonites have used formal and informal discourse processes to develop consensus about how the biblical message speaks to issues that arise in and around the congregation, and such dialogue extends to and draws from the wider church as a community of congregations. Congregations seek to "discern" how to be the church in their current situations. P. Yoder (1982) writes about how individuals can develop more systematic hermeneutic approaches to their Bible study and become more sophisticated readers of the Bible. But this does not mean that lay people are to defer completely to scholars or specialists. J. Yoder (1984) has studied four types of specialists he identifies in scripture for congregations to exploit: agents of direction, of memory, of linguistic self-consciousness, and of order and due process. (Contains 48 references.) (NKA)

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Tested in the Faith Community:

The Congregational Hermeneutics of the Mennonites

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Tested in the Faith Community:

The Congregational Hermeneutics of the Mennonites

The Mennonite-Anabaptists have been cultivating a social epistemic as their hermeneutic method for over 470 years. This may seem inevitable from a modern/post-modern - perspective; groups become groups by sharing meanings and developing knowledge mutually (though opportunities to contribute to the process may be unequal). What makes this hermeneutic tradition perhaps remarkable is that the Mennonite-Anabaptists have *intentionally* cultivated local congregations and even the larger denominational movement as discourse communities of faith, promoting egalitarian lay participation equal to that of members with formal ministries (although Mennonites have struggled, as others have, with authority imbalances, including authoritarianism and ethnic and gender inequities through the years).

The Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective, adopted by both the Mennonite Church (MC) and the General Conference Mennonite Church (GCMC) in their concurrent meetings, held in Wichita, Kansas, July 25-30, 1995, continues to promote a social epistemic. The largest denomination of the Anabaptist movement in Christianity, the Mennonites trace their history back almost to the earliest days of the Protestant Reformation. The MC's and GCMC's (the two largest Mennonite conferences in the United States) undertook the development, discussion, and adoption of their joint confession as part of a greater faith effort to unify organizationally in the near future. Here I will focus on the *Confession*'s renewal of the Mennonite tradition of congregational hermeneutics, the principles of which seem quite contemporary. The Mennonites' aim, however, has never been to be simply up-to-date, but to be faithful and obedient, in whatever present circumstance, to their faith

origins in Jesus and the first-generation apostolic church.

Biblical Scripture is foundational to this obedience. Consequently, hermeneutical processes are essential. And because scripture supports it, Mennonites have cultivated the beliefs that the principle site of hermeneutic activity is the local faith community (meeting in a prayerful spirit), that open discourse is its vehicle, and that it is fulfilled in consensus but perfected in obedience.

Several prominent principles of contemporary epistemology are readily apparent in the Mennonite tradition of congregational hermeneutics. That knowledge (or "local knowledge") develops through open discourse in identifiable communities such figures as Geertz have clarified for us. Along this same line, Burke was instrumental in developing, through his rhetoric of identification and consubstantiality, the ideas of language use as inherently rhetorical and of rhetoric as dialogical (*Rhetoric*) and, most concisely in his parlor conversation metaphor (*Philosophy* 110-11), the idea of dialogue as epistemic. Whorf, Sapir, and Burke ("Terministic Screens"), each with a slightly different focus, introduced us to the idea that language, the agency of dialogue, itself shapes knowledge. Gadamer seems a crucial source for our thinking about knowledge as *situated* and *contingent*, subject to modification as dialogue continues. Rather than extend this synopsis further, my purpose here is to discuss the contemporary form of the Mennonite tradition, perpetuated in the joint *Confession of Faith*, linking it to its early Anabaptist origins and biblical roots.

Anabaptist Beginnings and Mennonite Variety

Mennonite-Anabaptist histories like Smith's, Dyck's (*An Introduction*), Estep's, and Weaver's tell us that, although Anabaptism likewise moved away from Catholicism, it was

not a part of the Protestant mainstream, something both sets of reformers were adamant about in the intense times of the Reformation. One initial topic of dispute were the authority of the church over civil governments in making decisions regarding faith and Christian conduct. Another was the validity of infant baptism, which the Anabaptists rejected in favor of adult, believer's baptism. Swiss and continental Anabaptism got its start in 1525, shortly after Luther got the Reformation focused, and the Baptists, more well known in the U.S., began practicing adult, believer's baptism in England about a century later as part of a separate movement away from Anglicanism. Menno Simons joined the continental movement in 1536 and became a prominent leader. Many congregations, then, adopted his name as an identifier.

The religious thought that inspired the early Anabaptists seems to have been afoot in the rich and sometimes heated general atmosphere that fomented the broader Reformation. The first band of Anabaptists, thwarted by the Council of Zurich in their attempts to institute adult baptism upon confession of faith as part of the state-sponsored Swiss Reformed Movement, separated their church from the state's in January 1525. Defying official decree, they instituted adult baptism, enacting the principle that no other earthly authority for Christian living exists aside from scripture. Adult baptism upon confession of faith represents a person's repentance and conversion and covenant with God in the congregation and broader Church.

Such defiance made the early Anabaptists both heretics and insurrectionists in the eyes of the established churches and their sponsoring states, respectively, and led to a history of persecution, flight, and martyrdom. Heeding a call to obedient discipleship, they continued in this manner, despite the dangers, because in Zurich and elsewhere they had seen how

entanglement with the state compromised the church and its mission. They accepted the responsibility of collectively determining (through prayerful biblical study and listening for the Spirit) what obedience would mean in their various situations. Because they were hunted by both church and state, they had little access to seminary-trained leaders, except those who risked conversion after training. This secured the lay tradition and the practices of congregational hermeneutics in the Anabaptist movement, although a dialogic theology-by-debate was a practice at large among Reformation-era theologians and scholars.

Because of the tradition of congregationalism, many ways of being Mennonite have always existed from the movement's beginning. Some Mennonite communities are as conservative as the Amish, our Anabaptist cousins. Most congregations are not. Many energetically maintain the Anabaptist tradition. Others have gravitated toward mainstream Protestantism and even the conservative evangelical movement. So despite common historical roots and many shared beliefs, significant points of difference have always existed (Sawatsky; Snyder) and continue to exist between Anabaptist-Mennonites (Harder; Kaufman and Drieger; Kaufman and Harder). This diversity suggests the obvious, that Mennonites would tend to enact the general hermeneutic principles to be discussed here differently from generation to generation and from congregation to congregation, a truism inherent also in the "situatedness" of how even epistemological principles can be known.

Salvation History as Rhetorical Situation

That context shapes communication is a rhetorical truism. Bitzer's "The Rhetorical Situation," built on the foundation of Burke's attention to "scene" in *A Grammar of Motives*, is a particularly well-known discussion of this. So to understand this "motive" of Menno-

nites' congregational hermeneutics, we should consider the traditional Mennonite view of history and of the place of the church in the world.

The church Jesus established (Toews) is described many ways in the Bible. Two are particularly important to Mennonites: the images of the church as the body of Christ (a continuing incarnation) and as the kingdom of God (a theocracy). Jesus speaks in many places of the movement he came to establish as God's kingdom coming into the world (e.g., Matt. 2:3, 6:33). It is the community of those who have chosen to pursue God's rule, a present reality that will be fulfilled apocalyptically. The *Confession* says, "We believe that the church is called to live now according to the model of the future reign of God. Thus, we are given a foretaste of the kingdom that God will one day establish in full" (89).

Early Christians used the Greek term *ekklesia* to refer to the church, a term that originally referred to the city-state assemblies that governed in ancient Greece. By apostolic times, the Romans had appropriated the term to refer to the similar colonial assemblies that governed in the various centers of their extended empire. J. Yoder writes that the earliest Christians "believed that they were mopping up after an invasion in which their general had already established his lordship" (*Priestly Kingdom* 60) and that "The church is called now to be what the world is called to be ultimately" (92). This concept of the church as a community of people who are called away from the ways of the world to live voluntarily by God's rule has been traced to such early Anabaptists as Grebel (J. Yoder "The Hermeneutics," 305-06), Schiemer, Rothmann, and Philips (all ctd. in Klaassen, *Anabaptism* 104, 105, 115, respectively), and Marpeck (Klassen 98-99). Mennonite theological historians (e.g., Kuiper; Littell; Wray; J. Yoder) agree that this concept of the church was prominent among the early Anabaptists and Mennonites historically.

The *Confession*'s commentary on Article 9 ("The Church of Jesus Christ") discusses the church as a "new social and political reality," referring explicitly to this Greek term for assembly, *ekklesia (40-41)*. Snyder has discussed how Anabaptists have historically thought of the church/*ekklesia* as "outposts of the Kingdom of God" (24), in the plural perhaps prioritizing local congregations as assemblies in which kingdom business is done. Likewise, the nature of the church as the coming kingdom of God continues to be studied and promoted by other Mennonite writers like Blosser (*The Coming Kingdom*), Driver (*Becoming God's Community*), Harder (*Doors to Lock and Doors To Open*), Kraus (*The Community of the Spirit*), Kraybill (*The Upside-Down Kingdom*), Kreider (*Journey Towards Holiness: A Way of Living for God's Nation*), and those mentioned above, including those of the *Confession*.

Scripture records the stories of God's work in history to re-establish and nurture the communion humanity and God once had but lost because of humanity's fall. It witnesses to the salvation history that culminates, but doesn't end, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and in Jesus's establishment of the church (Kraus, "American Mennonites" 313; J. Yoder, *Priestly Kingdom* 69). The *Confession* discusses such issues in Articles 1-9.

In seeking to be God's kingdom with the help of the Holy Spirit, Mennonites also seek to embody Christ in the church, to continue his mission and, thus, his incarnation. Paul describes the church as the body of which Christ is the head in I Corinthians 12:12-13. Fully divine, Jesus was fully human too but unfallen; thus he became the model human and not only a divine sacrifice (*Confession* 13-14). Krause calls Jesus our "exemplar" (*Jesus Christ* 51) and the "paradigm" for humanity (*God Our Savior* 32). Jesus fulfilled what it means for humans to be created in God's image (Gen. 1:26-27). Obedient discipleship is the attempt, then, to achieve that image as well, to become what we were created to be, and the church is

the place where dialogue concerning what that means takes place.

Based on such biblical understandings, the early Anabaptists, including the Mennonites, endeavored to keep themselves free of entanglements with worldly powers, cultivating church-state separation for the good of the church rather than for the sake of the state or individual liberty.

Governments do have their ordained authority to control those who can't control themselves, but for Christians, this authority is superceded by God and by the church as a community of disciples. In the Mennonite view, however, the ordination of such governmental authority does not necessarily ordain the state's methods of control, which resort too quickly to coercive violence and the threat of violence, departing from the ethic of love Jesus commanded for his followers (Matt. 22:37-40; Mark 12:29-31). The prophetic-evangelical mission of the church is to call everyone, including those who wield worldly power, to enact this ethic of love. But this is the ethic of a voluntary community of the converted. So although it is *hoped*, the unconverted cannot be *expected* to enact kingdom ethics fully or consistently. The church itself doesn't fully live up to this calling.

The *Confession* on Hermeneutics

Over the years, Mennonites have used formal and informal discourse processes to develop consensus about how the biblical message speaks to the issues that arise in and around the congregation, and such dialogue extends to and draws from the wider church as a community of congregations. Congregations seek to "discern" (the term more common to Mennonites) how to be the church in their current situations. In general, the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* perpetuates such discernment practice. In Article 4,

"Scripture," it asserts the following:

> We accept the Scriptures as the Word of God and as the fully reliable and trustworthy standard for Christian faith and life. We seek to understand and interpret Scripture in harmony with Jesus Christ as we are led by the Holy Spirit in the Church.
>
> . . .
>
> We also acknowledge the Scripture as the fully reliable and trustworthy Word of God written in human language.
>
> . . .
>
> We participate in the church's task of interpreting the Bible and of discerning what God is saying in our time by examining all things in the light of Scripture. Insights and understandings which we bring to the interpretation of the Scripture are to be tested in the faith community. (21-22)

Here the *Confession* emphasizes the collective nature of interpretation and discernment, the testing of individual insights in the context of the Church, the faith community. But this collective enterprise involves or invokes also the Holy Spirit (which will be discussed more later). When it speaks of "discerning what God is saying in our time," the *Confession* also suggests the historical "situatedness" of the knowledge discerned. The passage above also suggests that the "Word of God," although conveyed reliably in scripture, is not "contained" there completely (God speaks still in our time) and that the human language it is written in may not convey God's Word fully. Also, when the passage speaks of scripture as the standard for faith and life, it suggests, as we have noted above, that the testing of insight leads beyond mere intellectual assent to the meanings discerned, albeit faithful, toward their

active application as "obedience" to the Spirit that leads.

The *Confession* comments again on the church as a hermeneutic community in Article 9, "The Church of Jesus Christ":

> The church is the assembly of those who voluntarily commit themselves to follow Christ in life and to be accountable to one another and to God, while recognizing that the church is imperfect and thus in constant need of repentance. The church's identity as God's people of faith is sustained and renewed as members gather regularly for worship. Here the church celebrates God's boundless grace, reaffirms its loyalty to God above all else, and seeks to discern God's will. (39)

Here the emphasis is not only on the church as a voluntary assembly of accountable followers or *disciples*, but also as *ministers* to each other, which this article goes on to note (40). This brings to mind the tradition of the Mennonites as a lay church in which all are followers of Christ but also leaders to each other, the average member as much as those with more institutional ministries.

This passage also seems to give some priority to the local congregation as the most immediate form of the assembly, the one that "gather[s] regularly for worship," at least for many practical purposes. But regional conferences also have their meetings, as does the global church, after a fashion, in denominational world conferences and ecumenical councils. The *Confession* also renews this more complex understanding of the church as existing "as a community of believers in the local congregation, as a community of congregations, and as the worldwide community of faith" (40). So although local congregations are the focus of immediate ministry, they are part, too, of a dialogue larger than the local scene and should

be responsive to insight developed elsewhere and feel responsible to the wider church as well, knowing that their insights will be tested in these larger faith communities. Insular, self-satisfied congregations can err just as individuals do.

Article 16, "Church Order and Unity," then, comments further on communitarian hermeneutics, not distinguishing necessarily the local church from the global. Here, the *Confession*'s emphasis turns toward consensus building:

> In making decisions, . . . members of the church listen and speak in a spirit of prayerful openness, with the Scriptures as the constant guide. Persons shall expect not only affirmation, but also correction. In a process of discernment, it is better to wait patiently for a word from the Lord leading toward consensus, than to make hasty decisions. (62)

All members are involved and valued in decision-making processes, discernment. Speaking or listening as part of a Spirit-inspired development of understanding, the membership affirms or corrects each others' thought on the given issue, referring to pertinent scripture (or with implicit and acceptable scripturally-based principles as the frame of reference). All are also valued as the membership registers its assent to or dissent from a gathering consensus, through their vote, at least, if not through participation in the dialogue. This Article's commentary asserts that all believers are spiritually gifted to participate in these processes and all should, thus, be open to each others' influence. Consensus, ". . .reached when the church has come to one mind on the [given] matter, or when those who dissent have indicated that they do not wish to stand in the way of a group decision," is achieved only under such circumstances (63).

"The Rule of Christ" and "The Rule of Paul"

The scriptural basis for the *Confession*'s promotion of such discernment practices is primarily "The Rule of Christ" (Matt. 18:15-20). Also important among Paul's writings is I Cor. 14:29-33, which has sometimes been called "The Rule of Paul" (J. Yoder, "The Hermeneutics" 300-05). Mennonites practice a Christocentric/hierarchical reading of the Bible, which I have discussed elsewhere (xxx), giving priority to the example and teachings of Jesus recorded in the Gospels and secondary authority to the rest of the New Testament record of the apostolic church's "immediate" response to the Christ event. The Old Testament is also authoritative as a record of salvation history up to Christ and in its teaching where it supports the New and is not superceded by what is "fulfill[ed]" (as Jesus comments on the issue in Matt. 5:17 NIV) in the New.

In Matthew 18:15-20, Jesus prescribes a procedure for dealing with a sinner within the fellowship. He says first the victim of the sin should discuss it with the sinner. If the sinner doesn't repent, Jesus then says to take two or three others as witnesses to a second discussion. If this also doesn't work, the matter should be taken up before the church. If the sinner remains unrepentant, even before the faith community's consensus, it is to suspend fellowship with that person. "The Rule of Christ," here, is applied directly to discernment about church discipline (and the *Confession* refers to the Rule in the commentary on Article 14, "Discipline in the Church"). Jesus then says this:

> I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.
>
> Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or

> three come together in my name, there am I with them. (Matt. 18:18-20 NIV)

Hermeneutic authority here is given to the gathered faithful, even in small numbers. We should note, however, that it is not simply their numbers that gives them this authority, but the effect that gathering *in his name* has in invoking the spiritual presence of Jesus, the Holy Spirit. This is the Spirit who the *Confession* asserts, in keeping with the Mennonite tradition, leads in discernment (21), as we noted above. The Spirit leads the gathered toward God's will; the gathered do not impose their will on God. It is this "word from the Lord," according to the *Confession*, that the church is to wait on in "prayerful openness" (62).

"The Rule of Paul" makes more explicit the transfer of such polity to all subjects of congregational consideration, not only moral discipline. Referring to the idea he has developed earlier (I Cor. 12)--that all among the faithful are endowed with gifts of the Spirit, gifts such as prophecy (an ability in the Spirit to speak God's truth)--Paul says this on the subject of orderly worship:

> Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop. For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged. The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets. For God is not a God of disorder but of peace. (I Cor. 14:29-33, NIV)

All can prophesy, can experience this gift. And all are given the responsibility to "weigh carefully what is said [prophetically]" and to exercise prophetic "control" over the prophetic instruction and encouragement of others. And again, the site for prophetic utterance to be weighed, controlled, and authorized is the gathered church.

Mennonite Scholarship on Hermeneutic Practice

Only the fact that it is biblical, as established above, validates the practice of congregational hermeneutics for Mennonites. Tradition doesn't validate itself. According to Mennonite tradition, paradoxically, this tradition would have no validity were it found unbiblical (J. Yoder, "The Hermeneutics" 291-92). In the scriptures and through the Holy Spirit, the church seeks guidance for its corporate life and the lives of individuals. The Bible, as record of salvation history and witness to its culmination in Christ, is the touchstone to which the church returns to situate itself in each generation and from place to place (J. Yoder, "The Authority"), not in any denominational tradition. Yoder uses the biblical metaphor of vine pruning to describe the Mennonite vision for carrying on Jesus's mission, saying "Far from being an ongoing growth like a tree. . . , the wholesome growth of a tradition is like a vine: a story of constant interruption of organic growth in favor of pruning and a new chance for the roots" (*Priestly Kingdom* 69). The Mennonite hermeneutic tradition does not bind congregations to being the church in precisely the same manner that former Mennonites determined or as Mennonites elsewhere determine. Nevertheless, we will quickly look back at Anabaptist origins (before looking into scholarly writing on contemporary practice) for some evidence that congregational discernment has been cultivated since that time.

The hermeneutic principles of the Anabaptists were in the air of the Reformation even before the movement began officially (although the mainstream of Protestantism gravitated toward a scholastic methodology and scholarly authority over biblical interpretation for the masses that maintained a clear distinction between lay people and the clergy similar to the one long held already in Catholicism). J. Yoder traces interest in "The Rule of Paul" to

Zwingli (a Swiss Reformed Church priest who played midwife to Anabaptism but didn't leave the state-sponsored reform movement) and interest in "The Rule of Jesus" to Grebel (a member of the first group to part with Zwingli and the state reform movement in 1525) ("The Hermeneutics" 300-06). From the beginning, then, the congregation has been the focal point of discernment. Ens asserts "a remarkably pervasive consensus" concerning universal "participation in the process of understanding" scripture among Anabaptists during the sixteenth century (69). Ens goes on to note that concern about antinomian individualism and conflict out of character with the unity of the Holy Spirit who inspires interpretation led to the development of the congregation as the site for testing what "spirits" might be moving individuals' interpretations.

Record of the congregational life of early Anabaptists includes such statements as the following. Spitelmaier (1527) described Anabaptist worship like this: "When they have come together they teach one another the divine Word and one asks the other: how do you understand this saying? Thus there is among them a diligent living according to the divine Word" (qtd. in Klaassen, *Anabaptism* 124). Reideman (1542) wrote, "Thus the church of Christ is. . .a pillar and ground of truth, in that the truth itself shows and expresses itself in her, which truth is confirmed, ratified, and brought to pass in her by the Holy Spirit" (qtd. in Klaassen 113). Moreso in the statement by Riedeman is the leading of the Spirit noted, although it seems implied also in Spitelmaier's reference to the "divine Word," *Word* being capitalized, as reference to the Spirit that inspired but is beyond the scripture as well. Ens says that Marpeck (another early Anabaptist leader) believed that "as the true author of scripture the Holy Spirit is also the true interpreter" (75).

Both passages above also reveal the belief that understanding develops through

dialogue and is completed in obedience, which writers like Dyck ("Hermeneutics"), Ollenburger, Roth, and J. Yoder ("The Hermeneutics") have noted as a common one among early Anabaptists. The latter of these principles is traced commonly in Mennonite circles to Denck's statement: "No one can truly know Christ except he follows him in life" (qtd. in Driver 86). Such a "hermeneutics of obedience" Ollenburger has traced also to a number of other early Anabaptist leaders, including Menno, Hut, Hoffman, Sattler, and Marpeck. Ollenburger asserts that this obedience was derived for them, as for modern Mennonites, from "committed conversations," "congregational hermeneutics" (59), not by their individual inclinations or inspiration. We have noted already how the *Confession* reiterates this belief.

Many have written concerning the practice of congregational hermeneutics in the contemporary church, and the writers agree that the essential method of authoritative biblical interpretation is prayerful, egalitarian dialogue. Everyone inspired to contribute to a given discussion is encouraged to do so (e.g., Swartley, *Slavery*; Harder). Concerning this essential principle, J. Yoder writes this:

> God speaks where his people gather and are free to be led. The marks of the validity of the conclusions they reach are to be sought not alone in the principles applied but in the procedure of the meeting. Were all free to speak? Was every speech heard and weighed? Did the prophets [those who give the discussion its direction by raising issues] grant their need to undergo interpretation? (*Priestly Kingdom* 22-23)

In this last question, Yoder implies that no one, no matter what her station in the congregation, should lord it over others or attempt to impose her authority, not a minister, deacon, or theologian. He says, "Any reservation of the responsibility for moral discernment to a

specialist must be challenged. . ." (17). All are inspired by the same Spirit potentially, giving all equal authority.

As practical guidance for congregational discernment that is Spirit inspired, biblical, and egalitarian, the MC's General Assembly adopted in 1977 the document *Biblical Interpretation in the Life of the Church*. It seeks to ensure that, with the Spirit's leading, "the Bible [will be allowed to] speak for itself" and that, through dialogue, congregations can overcome possible individual biases. Its central suggestions are these:

1. Observe carefully what the text says. . . .
2. Be sensitive to different literary forms [such as narrative, parable, poem, epistle]. . . .
3. Study the historical and cultural contexts of the passage. . . .
4. Make wise use of various translations. . . .
5. Consider how the text has been interpreted by others. . . .
6. Consider the message of the Bible as a whole. . . .
7. Meditate upon the Word in the spirit of prayer. . . .
8. Listen for the guidance of the Spirit, individually and congregationally. . . .
9. Respond obediently to the Bible's message.

(rpt. in Swartley, *Slavery* 240-42)

This list reveals the larger process of study that discernment dialogue (implied in #'s 5 & 8) is informed by. Number eight in particular reveals also that dialogue includes listening, in this context listening for the Spirit inspiring anyone's contribution.

This larger process of congregational study, of course, involves individual processes

as well. P. Yoder, in particular, has written concerning how individuals can develop more systematic hermeneutic approaches to their Bible study (*Toward Understanding the Bible* and *From Word to Life*). In *Toward Understanding the Bible*, he problematizes, for individual readers, *language* itself (reflecting on the ideas of some modern language theorists like Gadamer) (15-28), individual *understanding* (as a matter of perspective) (30-58), the Bible itself as a text written in other languages and times (requiring the use of #'s 3 and 4 above) (8-12), attitudes Christians have about the Bible (whether or not it even needs interpretation) (2-7), and the Bible as a collection of texts with a hierarchy of authority in Christian life (67-72). Nevertheless, he says of language, scriptural language specifically:

> The fact that God chose to be revealed through human language, as written by human beings, shows that God saw human language as an adequate mode for His revelation. God indeed seems to have taken human authorship seriously, not turning people into dictating machines, but letting each write with his own style and from his own perspective. (9)

Language may not be perfectly clear. No one writer may see the whole picture. And the fact of translation puts us at a disadvantage in discerning any writer's original meaning. But working together and with the Holy Spirit (73-77), Yoder asserts, as do others, that we can achieve an "adequate" revelation of the Bible's significance in our present situations.

On this basis, Yoder equates the divine and human character of the inspired congregational interpretation with the inspired writing of the biblical authors (73-74), which he has also reflected upon as analogous to the Incarnation of God in Jesus (10-11), "The Word [who] became flesh. . ." (John 1:14). Yoder's goal is to help lay people become more sophisticated and effective readers of the Bible, preparing them more fully for congregational

dialogue and obedience, by introducing them to the issues biblical scholars confront and the basic methods scholars use.

But as we have said, this does not mean that lay people are to defer completely to scholars or any other type of specialist. By the same token, specialists from within and beyond the congregation should be heard or otherwise consulted, if possible, on matters their expertise allows them to clarify (as #5 above implies). J. Yoder has studied four types of specialists he identifies in scripture for congregations to exploit (*Priestly Kingdom* 28-34): agents of direction (prophets who perceive congregational issues, as described in I Cor. 14:29ff, The Rule of Paul), agents of memory (scribes/biblical scholars, as described in Matt. 13:52), agents of linguistic self-consciousness (equated with the *didaskoli*/teachers who, like Timothy, can distinguish "sound teaching" from "chatter," 2 Tim. 1:13 & 2:16), and agents of order and due process (deacons or elders who moderate in meetings, as exemplified by James's summing of the dispute recorded in Acts 15). Such people's gifts should be exploited; their expertise, however, does not give them sole or collective authority over any scripture's meaning or application in a given situation. In humility, they too listen, and their voices blend with those of the rest of the likewise gifted congregation.

A voluntary community of the Spirit would not be moved by coercion, but by conversion and consensus, for the Spirit would not oppose itself, as Paul wrote. Experts, authorities, and lay people stand along side each other as checks against tyranny and individualism (Klaassen, "Anabaptist Hermeneutics" 10). The collective obedience that fulfills congregational discernment (Dyck; Ollenberger) must be as voluntary as congregational membership is. This obedience may not be ideal or perfect, insofar as the inspired church is and has always been made up of humans (*Confession* 39; Schertz), but it is a free

act of faith under such circumstances.

Epilogue

Although centuries old, this interpretive tradition seems uncannily modern. In particular, it cuts through the objective-subjective dichotomizing of knowledge, opting for inspired intersubjectivity as a model. Its dialogical nature implies, in the mode of modern philosophy, that knowledge is somehow developed *among* us (rather than in any one of us) and is historically situated (rather than in immutable objects and events). Mennonites, in their biblicism, reject the anti-foundationalism of post-modernism and its contention that *all* knowledge is contingent, *none* ultimate. But Mennonites generally grant that such knowledge lies with God, beyond us, and the extent to which human knowledge comes in line with it, with the Holy Spirit's help, is a mystery for now. Such knowledge as develops and decisions that are made together and with such guidance, however, are still authorized and authoritative for the community, even if they are not ultimate.

In the long run, to borrow the biblical phrase (Acts 15:28 NIV) that Anabaptists long ago made a motto, it is the goal to be able to say of whatever is discerned, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us."

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